

## Let Your Heart Be Light by evenhisfacewasanalias

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**Summary:** So I know it's a little early but I felt like we all need a little holiday fluff after such an intense second season. Takes place after the Snow Ball, with Mike introducing El to a few holiday traditions. A little mistletoe may have snuck its way in as well!

# 1. Chapter 1

It's nearly a week after the Snow Ball before Mike can see El again. She's still not allowed to leave the house, and Hopper isn't too keen on visitors. The rare occasions where he's been allowed over, he feels like the Chief is constantly watching the two of them together, like he thinks Mike might run off with her or something.

And he's not an idiot, he gets that Eleven can't go out just yet. Mike's not going to risk her getting found out just so he can show her how to play Pac Man or something. But he kind of misses having El to himself, so tonight he's snuck over to the cabin alone one night when he's sure Hopper will be working late.

And it was definitely worth Boba Fett action figure he offered Dustin to drop by the precinct and weasel Hopper's schedule out of the ever-helpful Flo. Because right now he has El nestled on the couch with him watching old reruns, peaceful in a way it never is with parents hovering or their friends all crowding in. She's curled up across the cushions, but her head is in his lap, one of his hands wrapped around hers while the other brushes through her curls.

He's still getting used to it, her having actual curls. Her hair is longer than his now, and it makes her look softer somehow. He's also grown a bit taller than her, which adds to how fragile she feels in his arms sometimes, even though she's the strongest person he knows. But she doesn't seem to mind him watching over her like this.

She was wearing another floral dress tonight, but with long sleeves and thick leggings underneath that wrapped around the arches of her feet (he thinks Nancy called them 'stirrup pants') in deference to the cold weather outside. Eleven seems to favor dresses now that she has a few of her own, though sometimes still layered with a shirt from Mike or Hopper. Mike likes her in them as well, though at first he was a little worried it would drive a further wedge between her and Max, and set her more apart from the group. But Dustin and Lucas were just so excited to have her back, and to Will she's like the sister he never had (and actually wanted). She warmed up to Max once she realized the other girl had no interest in taking Mike from her, and the two were quickly becoming fast friends. Max even promised to

show her how to skateboard when she could finally leave the cabin, even though she only pointed and laughed when any of the guys tried to learn.

So El was fitting back seamlessly into their party, though Mike can admit to sometimes being a bit selfish when it comes to spending time with her. The hand wrapped around hers tightens a little at the thought and El looks up at him with a sweet smile. Mike imagines they probably look pretty goofy staring at each other like this, but no one is here to make fun of them. Eventually they're pulled out their reveries when the noise of television demands their attention. It's one of those cheesy local commercials, with some guy practically yelling at you. This one is about a Christmas tree farm or something.

El looks back up at him, face quizzical. "Why...trees?"

"Like why are they selling trees?" She nods. "They're for Christmas. You decorate them with lights and stuff and then on Christmas morning Santa is supposed to leave presents underneath." Not for the first time, he thinks about all the things El missed out on. He wonders if he should try and explain Christmas too, but El is already forging ahead.

"Santa?" And how do you even begin to describe Santa?

"Yeah, he's all in red and he comes down the chimney and brings you presents."

Eleven looks over at her tiny stove, and the thin pipe leading out of it. Nothing bigger than a squirrel stood a chance coming down it. "How?"

"Because Santa's like magic," is the best way Mike knows how to explain it.

"Magic? Like, me?" She asks, mouth twitching slightly.

"Yes! I mean no, I mean..." He scrambles to try and explain the difference, just as he catches the smile that Eleven can no longer manage to keep hidden.

He realizes El's just been teasing him this whole time, or at for least

for part of it, but Mike doesn't mind. He's actually a bit relieved, really. "So I guess I don't have to be the one to break the news about Santa at least. How'd you find out?"

El nods over to the tv, "and Hopper."

"Hopper told you Santa wasn't real?" Mike could have guessed that Hopper wouldn't be that big on holiday spirit, but he never knew a grown up to be the one to ruin it. Usually it was another kid, intent on lording the knowledge over you.

"Accident." El added. That made more sense. Nancy had let it slip to him in the middle of an argument one Thanksgiving a few years back. She had felt really terrible about it, and even tried to convince him that Santa was real and she had just been lying, but you can never really go back to believing. He suddenly wishes El had gotten the chance to believe, even for just one year. To have a normal Christmas, a normal childhood, just for a bit. He guesses from the wistful look on her face that she probably wishes for the same.

"Well you still get presents, even after you find out about Santa," he offers up.

"Where?" She lifts her head from his lap to look around the room. Mike immediately misses their closeness.

"Hopper didn't say anything about getting a tree?"

She shakes her head. But then she suddenly hops off the couch, running over to the kitchen only to bring back a thick cardboard rectangle. When she turns it over he can see the picture of a painted Christmas tree across the front, covered with 25 little doors - several of which have already been opened.

"Oh, Hop got you an Advent calendar. Nancy and I used to get those every Christmas. We'd always fight over who's turn it was, so I guess my parents gave up on it. But hey, you haven't opened today's yet," he smiles. "Here..."

He carefully accepts the calendar from her, turning it around so she can push at the next door. Inside is a tiny foil wrapped chocolate

which she holds between them.

"Share."

"It's your calendar, El, you should have it." But she keeps holding it between them until Mike relents and breaks the chocolate in half, handing the bigger piece back to her.

She sits back on the couch with him as they enjoy the treat, watching as yet another local tree farm ad pops up on the tv. It's even cornier than the first, though it does give Mike an idea.

"Hey, maybe we can find a tree out in the woods and bring it in." He looks over at El, whose expression immediately lights up. Her joy is infectious, and his mind is already racing with planning it. "I mean I know where my Dad keeps the saw so we can just cut one down ourselves and put it up."

"Yes, Mike!" Her hands clasp his in excitement, but then her expression suddenly shifts. "But...we don't have..." she searches for the words, before letting go of his hands to reach for the calendar, pointing at the ornaments on the tree.

"Oh yeah, we'll need lights and stuff," he considers for a few minutes, before grinning, drawing out another smile from the girl across from him. "Just leave it to me, I think I can get everything we need in a few days. And then I'll come back."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

## 2. Chapter 2

As promised, Mike returns two days later with a big box and a small saw, and no Hopper in sight.

"Ready to go find a tree, El?"

She nods quickly, already stuffing her feet into sturdy boots and putting on her hat and coat. Mike falls a little bit in love with the way her curls stick from underneath the fuzzy cap.

"Ready."

El's bare hand slips into his own the second they walk through the front door, and Mike immediately warms, even in face of the cold Indiana winter. There's a light dusting snow already coating the ground, but not enough to dim their hopes of finding the perfect tree.

The perfect tree, however, is a little more elusive than he had planned for. Most of the trees in the forest aren't the right kind, or they're way too tall. It's mostly old growth, nothing so carefully planned as a tree farm. And Mike certainly doesn't mind the long walk when he's hand in hand with El, though it is starting to get pretty cold out. But just as their fingers and noses are beginning to go numb, they stumble across the tree entirely by accident.

It's a little crooked, and one side is missing a couple branches, but otherwise it's just right. The tree is only a little taller than El, and the trunk is slender enough that Mike thinks they'll be able to carry it back on their own, but most importantly it has that Christmas tree shape. El beams at him as she runs her fingers across the soft needles. Mike crouches down at the base of the tree, lifting the bottommost branches to fit the saw neatly at the base.

"Ok, all I need to do is..."

He tries to work the saw with one hand before quickly realizing that it's impossible, and then drops to his knees so he can use both hands to keep the blade steady. After a few rough passes he manages to cut through the outer bark, but the blade slows when he reaches the

actual wood. He adjusts his grip a few times, never quite getting a steady hold, before finally reaching up to wipe a hand against his suddenly sweaty forehead. He had barely cut through an inch. He was about to try holding both sides of the saw when the handle practically jumped out of his hand.

Mike nearly fell back in surprise, only to notice the saw kept going without him. He looks up to see El concentrating at the point where the blade was slicing through the tree, her expression slightly strained but no sign of a nosebleed yet. Mike lets out a whoop of laughter.

"That's awesome, El!"

She couldn't exactly smile while she was concentrating on moving the saw, but he could see the pride shining through her expression. She was getting better at this.

In far less time than it would have taken Mike - or really any ordinary human being - the tree is toppling sideways. The stiff branches nearly scratch against Eleven on the way down but Mike pulls her out of the way just in time. They're both a little breathless with exertion and joy at their accomplishment, and can't help but laugh with delight.

When their cheerful laughter finally subsides, they both reach take hold of one side of the tree to drag it back to the cabin, now thankful for the snow that eases their journey. Along the way they both keep sneaking little excited glances at one another across the branches. Mike's heart swells with pride at the memory of El chopping down a tree with her mind, though he can't tell if she's more happy about that or just about the tree.

They manage to get it through El's front door without losing too many needles, dragging it over by the window where she's cleared out a small space for it, stripping off their snowy outerwear along the way. Mike pulls a dusty old red and green metal stand from the box, and together they manage to get the tree upright.

"Ok, you hold it, and I'll just screw it into the base." He goes under the tree once more to fiddle with the screws, managing to get them

all in without pinching his finger until the very last one.

"Ouch!" He quickly sits back to stick his injured finger in his mouth. He looks up to see El looking down at him in confusion and concern.

"I'm ok, just pinched it a little." He holds out his reddened index finger to show that the hurt isn't serious.

"Why did you...your mouth?"

It takes him a second to figure out what she's asking. "Oh, I guess that just makes it feel better or something," he shrugs.

Eleven seems to accept his explanation, nodding a bit. But then she takes his hand and presses cool lips against his sore finger. Heat spreads across Mike's face at the tenderness of the gesture, and the feeling of her soft lips against his over sensitized skin.

She releases his finger after a few moments. "Better?"

"Yeah, better." He can feel himself blushing again, but he smiles at the hopefulness in her eyes. Not knowing what else to say, he suggests they start decorating. "I guess we can go ahead and get the lights on now."

Mike actually bought the lights himself from the general store where Ms. Byers worked, using the money he saved from visiting El instead of playing so many arcade games. They're small and multicolored, and he plugs them in real quick just to see El's face light up. But then they have to turn them off to wrap them around the tree, otherwise it spoils the final reveal. It takes them a few tries to work out a system of passing the lights back and forth as they wrap them, their fingers brushing together with each pass.

Afterwards, Mike brings the box over to show El what else is inside. Each of the party members donated a few ornaments each - few enough that their families wouldn't notice their absence, but just the right number to decorate their small tree. There's mostly a lot of red and green balls from the Wheeler household, and then a bunch of blue and silver snowflakes and icicles from Lucas's, which kind of clashes but it's alright. And then there's several cheesy cat ornaments



and silver bells from Dustin's house, and several handmade ones from the Byers. Max's family was still unpacking, so her contribution was a brand new pack of tinsel, and a small paper butterfly. It wasn't exactly Christmasy, but El immediately reached for it, placing it front and center on the tree.

"Pretty." She smiled.

"Yeah, it's nice." He agreed, adding a small silver snowflake next to it.

They worked together without hurry, choosing the perfect spot for each ornament. Mostly they worked in comfortable silence, until El happened to burst into giggles when a sparkly pinecone leaves glitter all over Mike's hands. In retaliation, Mike tries to wipe the glitter onto El, who just seems even more delighted by her new sparkly sleeves. Finally her giggles subside and she reaches back into the box.

"Mike."

He looks over at El but she's not looking at him. Instead she's looking at a tiny Mickey Mouse ornament with his name written across it.

"Oh yeah, my grandparents got those for us when they went down to Florida. We have a bunch of them so my parents won't miss them," he shrugs. "Maybe we can find an ornament that says 'Elle' on it, or make one or something."

She smiles at the idea, already moving a few ornaments around so she can place the 'Mike' one in the best spot. Mike decides then and there that he has to make her one before he visits again.

Eventually they near the end of the box, and Mike starts adding on the tinsel while El fishes out the last few stragglers.

"What's this?"

Mike turns to see her holding up a green sprig, with small white berries, and no hook on it. Mike groans. One of the guys must have snuck it in.

"It's mistletoe."

"Mistletoe," she repeats. "It's...bad?"

Mike realizes he must be making a strange face. "No, it's not bad. There's just a superstition around it. Like a weird belief," He adds, already anticipating the question, "According to tradition, you're supposed to kiss the person you're with when you're near it."

"Oh." Is all she says, before looking thoughtful once more. Mike is just about to turn back towards the tree when El reaches up to kiss him.

Her lips are warm this time, and so are the hands that clutch at his sweater. They move softly against his own as their breath meets somewhere in the middle. This kiss is as sweet as it is brief, and it leaves him a little shaky at the end of it. But El is practically glowing, looking as if she's finally figured out this whole Christmas thing. And maybe she has.

Mike is considering going in for another kiss, when he hears a knock at the door. He nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound, looking around frantically before realizing there's nowhere to escape or hide. And even if there was there's no way Hopper will miss the giant Christmas tree.

He looks back at El, who he realizes is waiting for him. There's no reason to put off the inevitable, however, so he simply nods at El to unlock the door. The sound of each deadbolt feels like a nail in his own coffin but soon the Chief is coming through the door, apologizing for being late and then stopping short when he notices Mike.

Mike can see Hopper's face cycle through about a dozen emotions. Anger turns to fury, which turns to exasperations, which turns to annoyance, which turns to resignation, which turns back to anger, and the whole process starts all over. He looks like he's just about to gear up for a very long lecture when he finally notices the tree behind them.

He stands there for a very long moment, not saying anything, just looking back and forth between the pair of them and the tree before finally running a hand down his face with a deep sigh.

"The tree looks nice." He manages, not without a sharp glare in Mike's direction. "But it's missing something."

El looks frantically over the tree for any sign of something missing, while Mike simply lets out a relieved breath. There's probably still going to be another lecture for them in the very near future, but at least he's not about to get thrown out on his ass.

El, however, seems more concerned with her imperfect tree. "What's missing?"

"Well it looks pretty good kid, but it needs a topper. Then it'll be perfect."

"Top...per?" She puzzles out the sounds, so much like his name but not.

"Yeah kid, let me just..." He wanders into the kitchen and grabs up the page of colored christmas ads from the newspaper and goes to work. A few moments later he comes back with a folded paper star. It's a little crooked but it's bright red and gold, and just the right size to sit on top. He hands it over to El to put it on.

Grinning widely, she stretches up to place it on the topmost branch, but her arms don't quite reach. She goes to hand the star back to Hopper, but he just scoops her up in his arm until she's high enough to reach it on her own.

"There," she states with satisfaction at this final addition, "perfect."

"Almost..." Mike regains his voice as he dives once more beneath the tree, stretching to plug in the lights. When he finally steps back El is still in Hopper's arms, and they're both looking over at the tree in awe. When Mike stands to look with them, he feels Hopper's free hand come to rest on his shoulder, giving it a friendly squeeze.

All in all it's a pretty nice tree.

### 3. Chapter 3

In spite of the Christmas tree incident (or maybe even because of it) Mike doesn't get banned from visiting the cabin. However, he is firmly warned never to do so without the Chief's permission again. Hopper even agrees to let them have a small pre-Christmas party - though that may have less to do with Hopper getting into the Christmas spirit and more to do with him not wanting to deal with sulking teenagers. And perhaps to make it up to El for missing out on Halloween. But either way, they get to break the only-two-visitors-at-a-time-ever rule and the whole party bikes up to the cabin a few nights before Christmas.

Mike is the first to show up, of course, this time with Will in tow. As much as Will hates it, even his friends have become reluctant to let him out of their sights again, though thankfully there's been no sign of ill-effects after being infected by the Shadow Monster. Still, no one is taking any chances. So Will accepts that one of the party members will always be at his side these days, and shares a knowing look with El, who is similarly under constant guard, as she greets them both. Dustin and Lucas arrive a few minutes later with Max, who is slowed down by the fact that you can't really skateboard in the woods. But Mike halts them in the doorway.

"Hey man, what gives?" They demand.

"Maybe you should look up." Mike offers back, and sure enough all four heads look up at the doorway to see where Mike has nailed the sprig of mistletoe. He knows one of them snuck it into the ornaments box and now it's time to for him return the favor. And maybe even figure out who the culprit was.

But all of them look equally flustered by its presence. Max turns a particularly bright shade of pink, looking back and forth between the two boys at her side. But she is the first to regain her words, and her resolve.

"Whatever," is all she says before she's quickly kissing Dustin's cheek, and what might be Lucas's mouth, before turning back to throw a challenging look at Mike.

"Hey! Hey! Break it up!" Hopper jumps up from the kitchen to intervene. "Jesus, what am I running here? Get your butts inside."

Hopper is actually shuffling them inside and apart, but the kids are all just laughing now, even Will and El who were just watching it all happen. The small cabin is suddenly very full and very loud and Hopper finds himself pinching the bridge of his nose to avoid the headache he knows is coming.

"Look do you kids think you can actually behave for a couple hours? I still need to go out and do a few things, but I will be checking in on you. And don't think I won't know what's been going on while I'm gone." He looks around the room giving each kid a firm look, communicating with his glare that there will be hell to pay if a single one of them steps out of line. With the exception of El, they all look reasonably subdued by this threat. He's still a bit hesitant about leaving them alone here, but he knows teenagers need their space - and quite frankly this cabin wasn't made to fit seven people.

He's barely out the door before Dustin turns to the group with an excited grin.

"Alright guys, prepare yourselves for an evening of holiday thrills," he announces dramatically. "For I have finally laid my hands on the elusive - drum roll please..."

But he is only met with dubious looks, and no drum roll.

"Come on guys!" He tries once more before moving on, only slightly less enthusiastic than before, "it's the Star Wars Christmas Special!"

He expects this news to be met with loud cheers but everyone just looks a little uncertain. Mike is the first to speak up.

"But El hasn't even seen the original trilogy yet. Shouldn't we watch that first?"

"The guy at the rental place promised me it was totally a stand alone thing. We'll watch the trilogy afterwards, it'll be totally fine."

"I'm not sure..."

"Come on guys, I paid \$3.25 for this! We have to watch it!"

So with a minimal grumbling they finally relent and set themselves up in front of the tv. Mike flops down onto the couch, and El immediately curls up at his side. Will sits comfortably on his other side, while Max and Lucas drag a bunch of pillows and blankets to the floor and sit with their backs against the couch, leaning against Mike and Will's legs. Dustin fiddles with the VCR for several minutes before seating himself on the arm of the couch.

"Alright guys, here we go!"

Mike has tried to explain a little bit about Star wars to El in the past, though she still doesn't totally understand why they're getting excited about a bunch of text scrolling across the screen. She does seem to remember Han Solo, and smiles in recognition as the rest of the group cheers.

"But why is the bear flying the...ship?" She asks quietly to Mike, but Dustin immediately jumps in.

"Chewie's not a bear, he's a Wookiee, and he's..."

Lucas heads off the history lesson by tugging Dustin down to the floor with them, "just watch the movie, man."

Mike whispers the shortened version to El, trying to explain a bit more about Chewie and Han, and the Millennium Falcon, but even he starts getting a little lost when they meet Chewbacca's family and start talking about 'Life Day'.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell is that?" Lucas shouts at the tv when Chewbacca's son Lumpy appears.

"It's clearly a Wookiee..." Dustin begins again, but this time Mike interrupts.

"No man, Wookiees are cool. That is an abomination." He points an accusing finger at the screen.

"It looks like Mr. Davis's toupee became sentient or something." Max chimes in, starting them all into fits of laughter as they offer up

progressively more ridiculous descriptions of Mr. Davis's hair and things that Lumpy resembles.

El is the only one left out, having never seen Mr. Davis. Mike tries to explain the joke, and what a toupee is, and eventually manages to get a small smile out of her. But he knows she's wishing she could be in school with them. And Mike wants her to be there just as much, though they both know that's impossible right now.

The rest of the party seems to catch on to this same feeling, and moves back to discussing the movie itself - though mostly to make fun of it. There's a brief moment of hope for the movie improving when Luke and R2D2 appear, but it turns out to only be a quick cameo, and nothing really happens. Eventually even Dustin gives in and starts cracking jokes about how bad the film is. By the time the hologram of Jefferson Starship starts playing no one is even watching the movie anymore, though they're all still laughing.

"Ok, this movie is officially lame. I don't even know how you ruin Star Wars, but they did it." Max declares.

"I say we move on to presents." Lucas chimes in, rubbing his hands together, to a general murmur of agreement.

"Alright fine." Dustin relents, pausing the video.

"At least we got to see Han and Luke again." Will offers in attempt to cheer him up.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm demanding my \$3.25 back." Dustin announces, but still takes the time to rewind the film before putting it back into its case.

The group moves to sit in more or less a circle, all holding the gifts they brought, though Will has temporarily abandoned his seat to search for some Christmas music on the radio. After a few minutes of messing with the dials he finally finds a station playing Christmas oldies and rejoins the group. Lucas pulls a face when he hears what's playing.

"Is that Kenny Rogers? Seriously?"

But Will just shrugs. "He's not so bad."

Mike considers arguing the point, but Will's got that faraway look on his face he still gets sometimes, so no one seems to question his response. At least the song is Christmas-y. And they have more important things to think about now, like presents.

This year they all agreed to do a not-so-secret-Santa because the party had grown so much - and because no one really had any money. Instead, they each received a single name and a \$5 limit. At first they had considered doing a real secret Santa, with presents hidden in lockers and secret clues, but then El would have been left out. So they all agreed to wait until they could all be together, and ditched the whole secret part. It would still be a surprise to see who picked who, and of course the present itself would be secret.

Dustin volunteers to go first. He apparently got Lucas's name, and gifts him the latest Masters of the Universe mini-comic, which Lucas immediately starts flipping through in excitement. Max nudges him to remind him he's supposed to be the next Santa.

"Oh yeah, here you go Will." He hands Will a small package, which he opens to reveal a box of fancy shading pencils.

"I also got you some more paper, but I couldn't figure out how to wrap it." He shrugs, but Will just beams.

Will's gift to Mike is an illustrated map for their D&D campaigns, complete with castles and mountains and caves and more than a few monsters in each unexplored area.

"This is amazing, Will!" The entire group is looking over the map in wonder, and Mike is already planning out their next campaign. El asks about some of the monsters and Dustin and Lucas rush to explain them all. Max has started learning a little about the game already, and helps explain some of the things to Eleven as well. Mike is looking forward to getting to teach El how to play for real one day - she will be the perfect Mage of course. And speaking of which...

"So this is for you," Mike thrusts the box in his hands towards Max.



She's already grinning as she begins opening it, but her smile grows wider when she sees what's inside.

"So you're officially our party's zoomer now," he decrees to cheers from the group. "You'll get the highest dexterity stats, and some other stuff too. I've already written it all up for the next campaign."

Her character page sits inside the box, along with a brightly colored 'Zoom' sticker to add to her skateboard. She jumps up to hug Mike, surprising both of them with the force of it. Mike looks over at El to make sure she's alright with this, but El is just smiling back at them both, having long since accepted Max as their friend. This works out well, because Max's gift is actually for El - a set of blue and pink sparkly nail polish.

"It's not my kind of thing, but.." she shrugs, but El looks pleased - if a little confused. Mike tries to explain

"It's nail polish, you paint your nails with it to make them different colors." Eleven nods still looks a bit puzzled. He add, "it's makeup."

"Oh!" Makeup, she knows. Mike's already explained that to her, and Hopper had even bought her a little kit to wear for the Snow Ball. She reaches over to hug Max. "Thank you."

"You'll have to figure out how to put it on yourself though, I never really got the hang of it." Max confesses, but accepts the hug gratefully.

"I'll help you, El," Mike offers casually, "if I can paint figurines, nails can't be much harder." Secretly, he was kind of looking forward to it. He had enjoyed helping her with makeup before - he may not have totally known what to do with it, but it was a chance to touch her and study her face up close without it being weird. It's one of his favorite memories from last year, and one he held onto when he thought she was lost to them. And now he definitely doesn't mind getting another chance at being that close again - even if it's just to paint her nails. But she seems equally thrilled about his offer, and is about to ask if he'll paint them now, until Will gently reminds her that she's up next.

El has to run back to her room to grab Dustin's gift. She comes back a few moments later with a small bowl filled with water and rocks, which is a bit puzzling at first. But everyone crowds around to look inside, where they find a blue speckled salamander peeking out at them. Dustin grins broadly down at it, showing off his front teeth, and the salamander almost seems to smile back.

"Oh my god El, this is great! What kind is he? I'll have to look it up - no wait, I'll have to ask Mr. Clarke. I'm still banned from the library til January..."

After the closing of the gate, Dustin had told El all about Dart, and about stealing the library books. The rest of the party had eventually forgiven him for hiding Dart away, but El actually felt bad for him. Possibly she had her own share of guilt still weighing heavily on her for being used to open the gates, but she also understood loss more than anyone else in the group. Which is why she spent hours at the creek out back searching for a perfect (and far safer) amphibian for Dustin, and picked out the prettiest one she could find.

"He actually is kind of cute..." Max agrees.

"I think I'll name him Dantes, like Edmund Dantes." Dustin already has the little guy crawling up his hand, smiling as he inspects the blue spots along its sides.

"Who?" Lucas demands. Mike was wondering the same thing.

"He's the Count of Monte Cristo, you philistines!" Dustin admonishes them, but he's still grinning at his new pet.

"You...like him then?" El asks gently, making sure she did the right thing.

"El, I love him! You're the best!" He offers her a one armed hug, careful of Dantes still sitting in his other palm. El just looks pleased that her gift was such a success, and Mike is equally happy for her.

Hopper eventually returns while they're all sitting down to enjoy their new gifts, seemingly relieved to find the cabin still in one piece and the kids all accounted for and not missing any limbs. But with an

eye to the late hour he finally shoos them out, a little less grumpily than he had in the past. He even allows Eleven wave them off from the porch, which gives Mike the perfect opportunity to drop back and sneak a palm-sized box into her hands.

"Hey, uh, so this isn't your real present, it's just a small thing, but..." she opens her hands to reveal a small package topped with a little red bow, just as Mike runs off to rejoin the group.

She watches her friends fade out into the evening forest, before finally opening the box. Inside is a small silver angel, fitted with a tiny loop of glittering ribbon, with the name 'El' painted across her wings.

## 4. Chapter 4

Apologies for the short update this time - this was meant to be the ending of the original, much shorter version of this story, but I thought you all would still appreciate it. Next (longer!) chapter will be up later this week!

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Joyce remembers just in time to avoid the trip wire, carefully stepping over it as she approaches the cabin. Jim had said something about a special knock as well, but she can't for the life of her remember what it was. So she gives a tentative knock, and announces herself, hoping not to scare the poor girl.

But instead it's Jim who answers the door, looking more than a little started as he steps out onto the front porch, letting the door close behind him.

"Joyce," he starts, seemingly unsure what to say next. "What are you doing out here?" He flinches at his own poor choice of wording, but Joyce has known him long enough not to take it the wrong way.

"Oh! Will mentioned that Eleven wanted some stuff to decorate the cabin for Christmas. He gave Mike some things for her, but I thought I'd bring these by as well."

She brings her hands forward to reveal two red, felt stockings, one with 'Eleven' and the other with 'Jim' carefully stitched in gold thread. The lettering on both is slightly off center, but she's added a little star above the i on Jim's, and a small heart after Eleven's name to balance them out a bit. Jim just smiles and accepts the gift gratefully.

"Thanks, El will love these. I really appreciate this, Joyce." The moment stretches between them, both of them enjoying the sight of the other smiling - an increasingly less rare occurrence these days.

"I guess I should go hang these up," he jerks his thumb towards the cabin as he opens the door behind him. "Thanks again. For the, you know..."

It's then that Joyce notices the little sprig of green and white that's wedged in the doorway and nearly lets out a laugh, "is that...?"

Jim looks up, looking entirely perplexed at its presence. "The kids must have..."

He turns back to face her, frown creasing his forehead, but she simply takes the opportunity to stretch up on her toes and brush a quick kiss at the corner of his mouth.

"Merry Christmas, Jim."

## 5. Chapter 5

Hopper had to have known he'd given her an impossible task in asking her to not to get up before 9 am on Christmas. No kid can sleep in on Christmas morning, and certainly not for their first real holiday celebration. Halloween had been a disaster of course, and Thanksgiving kind of got overlooked with everything else going on, but Hopper was determined to get this one right.

The one small flaw in his plan is that it had been a long time since he had done anything other than try and ignore the holiday season, and he's a little rusty on some of the traditions. And so he couldn't even get mad at the Wheeler kid for sneaking over and helping El set up a tree, or putting together a Christmas party for the kids, because he had honestly sort of forgotten about all that pre-Christmas stuff. But Christmas morning he remembered - that one he could get right.

And it was a perfect morning for it. He left the windows uncovered just this once to see the snow falling silently outside, while a warm fire was already beginning to crackle and drive the chill from the cabin. Their small tree was all lit up with a pile of inexpertly wrapped presents underneath, and their stockings hung on the wall beside it. It was like a damn Christmas card, Hopper thought, and chuckled to himself.

He finally took pity on El at 8:37 am, though he was certain she had been up since before the sunrise, and had probably taken a peek or two the night before. But whether she peeked or not, she still came out of her room just as excitedly to find not only presents under the tree but also an ego gingerbread house sitting on the kitchen table. Hopper had whipped it up himself this morning, and he was feeling pretty proud of it. It was really just three eggos stacked on top of one another, with two more for the roof, all decorated in cinnamon, whipped cream, and candy to sort of look like a house, but the sight of it makes El light up like...well, like it's Christmas. Hopper watches as she looks back and forth between the tree and the ego house, not quite sure where to start first. He solves that dilemma easily enough.

"Breakfast first, then presents." He declares, and El quickly rushes over to her seat at the table. It says a lot about how much she's grown

that she actually waits for him to sit down before digging in. Hopper goes for the stack of regular waffles beneath, leaving the candy coated 'roof' to El, which she attacks with relish. It doesn't take long to demolish the house between the two of them.

In the end El looks thoroughly pleased, if a little sugar hyped, by his culinary efforts as she scrapes the plate for any missed candy pieces, allowing him time for a second cup of coffee. And it's surprisingly peaceful, the two of them just enjoying a quiet breakfast together - even with El practically vibrating out of her seat to move on to the next part. She's trying very hard not to keep looking over at the tree, and the presents beneath, and becomes hyper-focused on his coffee instead.

"Can I?" She suddenly asks, watching him take another sip.

"What, you want to try some?" He huffs out a surprised laugh, "you won't like it. And it'll stunt your growth." He adds, as if everything needs to be some sort of lesson.

"Stunt my growth?" She puzzles out the warning.

"Yeah, all your friends will keep growing taller but you'll be stuck as a shortstack." He teases.

Eleven seems unruffled by the possibility, however. Either she's figured out when Hopper is just making stuff up to protect her, or she isn't really worried about being short. Hopper gives up explaining, recognizing that some lessons just have to be learned.

"It's your funeral, kid." He states, handing over the cup.

As expected, El grimaces at the first taste of the bitter liquid. She hands it back to Hopper, who's trying and failing not to laugh at the look of disgust on her face, or the way she practically licks the eggo plate to get the flavor out of her mouth.

"So not a coffee fan, then?" He teases, and she shakes her head decisively.

"Well I think I can finish my cup in the living room," he announces, getting up from his seat and taking his coffee with him. El practically

leaps from hers and seats herself on the floor by the tree. The radio across the room flips on with a quick glance, somehow already set on the Christmas station. Or perhaps they're just all Christmas stations today.

Hopper takes his time settling onto the couch. Anticipation is part of the joy of Christmas morning. Also it's pretty fun watching Eleven squirm. She's sitting within reaching distance of the presents, but her hands are tucked firmly in her lap. She hasn't quite developed any real patience in the time they've spent together, but she's at least getting better at pretending. Hopper explained to her that it wasn't a lie to pretend to be patient, it was just called 'being polite'. El doesn't entirely grasp the underlying concept yet, but she knows she has to wait for some things. And she is willing to wait sometimes, provided she has a firm timepoint at which she won't have to wait any more. 'Soon' is still a dirty word in the Hopper household.

"You can open your stocking first," he allows, glancing up towards Joyce's gift. El jumps up to pull down the stocking labeled 'Eleven' from where it is hung up on a newly fitted hook. Hopper supposes they should really start using the name Jane at some point, but old habits die hard.

The girl in question sits back down with her prize, dumping the contents of her stocking onto the floor without further ado. An assortment of candy and small trinkets falls out, and El quickly sorts through them, looking over each item. But one in particular seems to elude identification, and she holds up the orange, foil-wrapped ball towards him with a quizzical expression.

"It's a chocolate orange," he explains, "I used to get them every Christmas as a kid. Here, you have to kind of..." he plucks the orange from her hand, before giving it a good thump against the table, "before you unwrap it."

El still looks a little perplexed, but accepts the orange back from him and carefully peels off the foil. Inside, the ball has split into a dozen perfect little slices. She picks out one of the pieces, nibbling a corner thoughtfully at first before grinning and shoving the whole slice into her mouth. She pops another two pieces as well before holding up the rest of the orange to offer some to Hopper.



"Thanks, kid."

And it's sweeter than he remembers, but still good. They trade the orange back and forth until they're both almost sick with sugar, sagging back against the couch.

"I think we can move on to presents under the tree now."

But El shakes her head. "What about yours?"

"What about my what?" He asks, but she's already darting up to bring over his stocking. "That's just for show kid, Santa didn't put anything in it."

But El hands him the perfectly flat stocking anyway, and he makes a small production of reaching in, knowing that he won't find anything inside. Except just as he puts his hand in his fingers catch on the edge of something thin and flexible. He nearly frowns in surprise, before pulling out the small hand-drawn card. It's a picture of their Christmas tree detailed in crayon, with the two of them nearly dwarfed beside it. She's wearing her favorite dress and he has on his hat and his badge, made with a gold star sticker. 'Merry Christmas' is written in alternating red and green at the top, and El's name signed at bottom as El Hopper.

The girl herself climbs up on the couch next to him, watching him as he looks over the card with a wide smile. He reaches out with his free hand to squeeze her much smaller hand in his own, thanking her for the gift without words.

"Will helped," she adds, which is obvious from the neatness of some of the lettering, though the tree and the drawing of the two of them is all her own.

"I'll just go put this up on the fridge then, yeah?"

With that he hops up to go search for a magnet before he does something embarrassing like getting all mushy and crying over a Christmas card. He can hear El moving around behind him, shuffling back down to the tree, and laughs a little at how ridiculous they both are.

"Begin with the small ones in front."

El waits until he at least is facing her again before she starts tearing into her gifts, and he settles back into the couch while she makes quick work of the wrappings. Most of the presents contain practical things like socks and mittens, though she looks a little surprised to find that some of the larger packages yield weighty textbooks.

"I figured you'd want to start studying before school starts next fall." He offers casually, but El looks thrilled at the promise of attending school next year. "You might have to start back a couple grades, but I'm sure we'll get you caught up."

Her face falls at the news, slowly realizing this means she wouldn't be in class with her friends.

"No!"

Hopper can already see the makings of another tantrum, and immediately holds up his hands in surrender. He doesn't want another holiday blow out. "Look, maybe we can get some of the other kids to tutor you or something, so you can get a head start."

And it's crisis averted, apparently. In fact, El looks even more excited now at the possibility of more time with her friends. Hopper also considers enlisting the help of Nancy Wheeler, who he's pretty sure is straight A student. He immediately dismisses the idea of recruiting Jonathan Byers or Steve Harrington, who he's pretty sure are not. He knows he should really be getting her a professional tutor, but it's still too early to bring in new people. And how would he even begin to explain El's situation to them?

But El is already moving onto more important issues, like what exactly is in the largest box beneath the tree. She's lost a little of her earlier frenzy by now, and actually takes the time to carefully remove the bow and peel off the wrapping paper, certain that this one is something extra-special. Inside the box, neatly wrapped in white tissue paper, is a new winter coat in pale blue wool. With a noise of excitement, El jumps up to try it on over her pajamas. It's nearly long enough to reach her knees, and nips in at the waist before flaring out beneath. Little pompoms decorate the pull ties for the hood, which

bounce about as El twirls in her new coat.

"I figured you could use an actual girls' coat." He thinks about last winter when he found her, terrified and wearing a stolen overcoat, and how different she looks now, smiling happily in clothes of her own. She dances around for a few more minute while he looks on affectionately. He's glad no one else is around to see what a sap he's become.

"I think there might be one more," he suggests, interrupting her as she's trying on her new hat and mittens with the coat.

"One more?"

"Right there, in the back."

He points to small, overlooked package nearly hidden by the tree stand. El doesn't bother removing the coat or her hat, though she does take off her mittens to open up the final present, pulling out a small silver locket from the tiny box. She immediately clasps it to her chest, beaming back at him with her brightest smile yet.

"Check inside." He returns her smile with one of his own, and watches as she carefully opens the the two sides to reveal a small photo tucked inside.

"It's Mama..."

Hopper can already see the tears forming, but El's still smiling at the old photo of her Mom, back from before anything happened to her. He's probably broken several laws taking it from the evidence folder, but he figures it's worth it for the look on El's face right now. And also for the way she jumps into his lap, throwing her arms around his neck and burying her damp face into his shoulder. His own arms go to wrap around her and hold her steady.

"Thank you...Dad." Her words are muffled into the fabric of his shirt, but he doesn't miss a single one. It's the first time she's ever called him that, and in the end that's what finally does him in. Now she's got them both crying.

"I'll take it you like it then?" He asks without needing to, but lacking

anything better to say that won't set off a fresh wave of tears. El just nods into his shoulder, still clutching the locket behind him. "Here, let's put it on you."

She untangles herself to sit back a bit, as Hopper tries to discreetly wipe at his eyes before she looks at him again. El just smiles like she can see right through him, and he looks away to try and fiddle with the clasp of the necklace. She finally removes her new coat and hat, setting them aside before sitting back on the couch next to Hopper, who requires several minutes to undo the tiny clasp. It's another struggle hooking it back together around El's neck, but between them they manage it. She twirls the locket around until it sits right below her collar, looking up at him for approval.

"Pretty?"

"Yeah kid, real pretty." He smiles. "Come on, let's see if we can't find It's A Wonderful Life on tv. It's a sacred Christmas tradition."

He nearly laughs at El's solemn nod, but then she's flipping through the channels with a quick tilt of her head, only stopping when Hopper catches the familiar black and white face of Jimmy Stewart. They've missed a few minutes of the beginning, but it's easy enough for El to catch on. She leans into his side as they settle in to watch the rest of the film, and Hopper presses a kiss into her messy curls, thinking about how they're both getting a second chance at family.

## 6. Chapter 6

It takes a little convincing to get his parents to let him leave the house on Christmas day, but Mike finally makes it out just before sunset. It's a little bit of a ride to get to the cabin in the woods, but it's fast becoming as familiar a journey as visiting Will or Lucas or Dustin. He sometimes wishes El could have kept living in the blanket fort with him forever, even though he knows it's ridiculous. Still, he refuses to tear the fort down, waiting for the day she's finally allowed to visit again. He hopes it's soon.

When he arrives at the cabin, Mike is a little surprised to find the windows uncovered. He props his bike up against a tree and goes to peek inside, catching sight of both El and Hopper asleep in front of the tv. The floor is still littered with wrapping paper and boxes, so he figures they've probably been there for a while now. But they apparently have a sixth sense for company, and seem to be just now waking up. Mike falls back from the window and slowly walks up to the door, waiting until he hears the tv shut off before carefully knocking, not wanting to startle either of them - particularly not the Chief. But Hopper doesn't look like he's about to shoot him when he answers the door, so Mike counts that as a win.

"Mike!" El shouts excitedly from the couch behind him, while Hopper just runs a tired hand over his eyes in the face of so much teenage enthusiasm.

"Yeah kid, I can see him standing in front of me. The question is why?" With this he looks pointedly down at Mike.

"Um, I just came to bring El her present." Mike holds the gift up in front of him just in case he requires proof.

Hopper remains seemingly unconvinced. "I thought you already did all that?"

"No, sir, that was just secret Santa, this is different." He explains quickly.

"Alright, get in here and let's hurry this up." Mike steps inside the

door and shifts uncertainly. This wasn't exactly how he planned this going. He sort of hoped he'd actually get to spend a little time with El, not just hand her her gift and leave. And it's sort of awkward now with the Chief just watching them.

El seems to be thinking the same thing, and she turns pleading eyes on her adopted father. Hopper stares right back with his most authoritative look, and Mike just tries to keep quiet during their wordless standoff, knowing it's best to stay out of it. But Hopper's heart doesn't really seem to be in it today, and Mike can actually see the moment where he finally relents.

"I'm going to get some more firewood." He announces, grabbing up his hat and coat and heading towards the still open door.

"But I'll be back in 15 minutes," he turns to fix his gaze on Mike, "maybe sooner."

As a threat it's a little vague, but he's not given much time to reflect on it as El is running into his arms the second the door shuts. He hugs her back with equal force, losing all his previous uncertainty now that it's just the two of them. He's half tempted to stay like this until Hopper comes back, just holding one another, but he came here on a mission after all. So after another minute or so he reluctantly pulls back, holding up the gift between them.

"I got you something, El."

Her eyes grow wide with surprise and delight at the small package. "What is it?"

"Open it." He prompts.

She takes the box from his hands and pulls him over to the couch. Mike tries to pull off his coat along the way without letting go of her hand, and nearly succeeds. They end up sitting sideways on the couch so they're facing each other as he watches her peel off the wrapping paper. El opens the box to reveal another, slightly smaller box inside. Only this one is pink, and decorated with painted bows and tiny roses.

"It's a music box, see," Mike tells her, opening the lid of the box so the tinkling music inside can begin. A tiny ballerina figurine leaps up to twirl to the music in front of a mirror, and Eleven is immediately enchanted by her.

"And then you wind it up like this..."

Mike shows her how to wind up the music box, and does his best to explain how it works even though he does quite know himself. He shows her all the little compartments for makeup or jewelry and she delights at each new discovery.

"I have something for you too." She reveals, after they've just finished tucking her new nail polishes inside the music box. "Close your eyes."

Mike is curious what she has for him, but shuts his eyes dutifully. He expects her to leave and go get whatever it is, but she never moves from where she's seated across from him. He's keenly aware of her presence, though she's not sitting close enough that they're touching. Still he can feel the warmth radiating from her skin, and hear her carefully measured breathing. He wonders if her eyes are closed too. And then suddenly, he hears it.

*Mike.*

Hearing might be the wrong word for it, though. It's like he feels it, in the back of his mind, someone - El - whispering his name. And his name is warm, and carefully excited, just like he imagines her to be.

"El, is that you?" He responds aloud.

*Mike!*

The feeling is just as quiet - if feelings could be described as quiet at all - but even more excited this time. He opens his eyes at the same time she does.

"Were you just.."

She nods.

"Did you find me in the dream circle?" She had explained to him

before where she went to communicate with Will when he was in the Upside Down. "I thought you needed the whole...sensory deprivation thing?"

She shakes her head. "Not this time."

Mike's grinning so broadly it almost hurts. "Do you know what this means, El? We'll always be able to talk to each other, no matter where we are!"

She shakes her head again. "Can't talk yet."

Mike feels almost certain he's heard her say Mike in his mind, but then maybe it was more like the feeling he gets whenever she says his name. Or how she feels saying it. He's not quite sure who was feeling what, but it doesn't worry him.

"But I can still feel you in my head. So I'll be able to know when you're thinking about me, or you'll be able to know when I'm thinking of you?"

El searches for the words to explain it, but finally settles into an expression that Mike interprets as 'yes'.

"El, do you know how great this is? Now we'll always be able to find each other, and I'll always know that you're safe."

All 353 days of not knowing where she was or if she was even alive come rushing back to him, and so many unshed tears suddenly spill forth, even though he's as happy as he was when he first got her back. El seems to immediately understand what he's thinking, or perhaps she can feel some part of it, and she wraps herself up in his arms once more. The two of them simply cling to each other as if they're trying to make up for all their lost time. And Mike shuts his eyes and listens carefully to the silence between them, still feeling her calling his name in the back of his mind.

*MikeMikeMike...*

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Hopper returns to the cabin, as they knew he would eventually. He doesn't look entirely pleased to find the two of them tangled up on



the couch together, even though they're still just holding one another, but he refrains from commenting.

El presses their luck a little further. "Can Mike stay?"

And Mike pulls away from her to look back at the Chief expecting to be told that Christmas is family time and he should return to his own. But instead the older man just lets out a long-suffering sigh, and flicks the tv back on.

"He can stay until the end of the Grinch and then that's it." He decides firmly, claiming the seat between them to break up whatever was going on while he was gone. But of course El just crawls over him to wedge herself between the two, utterly content despite the tight squeeze. Hopper just rolls his eyes at the pair before scooting over to make room for both of them. He draws the line at allowing them to cuddle, however. His heart has already grown enough sizes for one day.

## 7. New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve was taking place at the Byers' house this year. Normally Mike would host a late night campaign at his house for the holiday, but they all agreed bringing Eleven there would raise too many questions. And Mike really wants to give her a real New Year's Eve - even if just means he and Nancy are helping the Byers decorate their house with metallic streamers and balloons. Dustin comes early to help as well, still somewhat apologetic about putting a demodog corpse into Mrs. Byers' refrigerator. Hopper wouldn't even let him keep his discovery, insisting they destroy everything that still remained from the Upside Down, to make sure it never seeped through again.

And so far it hadn't, and life was going back to normal - more or less. Slightly less normal in the case of Eleven and Will, but that was all the more reason to get the holiday right, Mike thought as he frowned at his slightly lopsided streamers. Nancy swooped in to correct them, using the slight advantage in height she still possessed but was rapidly losing to her little brother. She smiled a little at his frustration, seeming to guess at what he was thinking. Mike suddenly realizes she probably needed this too, after spending nearly the entire year unable to talk about what happened to her best friend. In a rare moment of sibling empathy, he smiles back at his sister and nudges her shoulder with his own.

"Guys, I've got it - we totally need one of those helium machine thingies..." Dustin's voice cuts through the moment, but Nancy just laughs.

"I don't think that's quite in the budget, let's just tape some up in the corners and let the rest fall."

Will and Dustin nearly pass out from blowing up every balloon in the pack, but in the end they have to admit the house looks pretty good. The Christmas decorations are still up, but everything else is done in gold and white, and it looks like a real New Year's party. They've even got silly paper hats that say 'Happy New Year!' or '1985!', and confetti and noisemakers for the countdown. The preshow for Dick Clark's Rockin New Year's Eve is already playing on tv by the time

Lucas arrives. Jonathan and Nancy look on from where they're curled up on the couch as the boys all rush over to greet their friend.

"Are you sure you don't mind spending New Year's at home with our little brothers and their friends?" Jonathan asks for the third time today, only partly in jest.

"There's nowhere I'd rather be." Nancy smiles up at her boyfriend sincerely. It may be a quieter night than some of her previous holidays, but quiet is what they all need right now. They both look on in amusement as Mike and Lucas keep glancing towards the door, waiting for the rest of their party to arrive. Mike in particular is impatient, this being the first time El has been able to leave the cabin since the Snow Ball.

Thankfully, he doesn't have to wait for too long. Hopper arrives with Eleven shortly after it gets dark out, so the lights and decorations are in full effect. El looks up in awe as she enters the house and Mike's heart swells with pride at her expression.

"Mike! It's so pretty..." she smiles at him, and even Hopper looks pleased with their efforts.

"Here, El, I saved you the best one..." Mike rushes up to place the sparkly paper tiara he'd been saving on her head, fitting the headband among her unruly curls. It's gold to match his own hat, and covered in glitter which shakes off into her hair a little. She looks over to where Nancy and Joyce are wearing their own silver tiaras, running her fingers over the edges to imagine how she looks in her own. Hopper and Jonathan, unsurprisingly, decline putting on party hats.

"Alright kid, try and stay out of trouble until midnight." Hopper chides Eleven affectionately, attempting to straighten her tiara and succeeding only in getting glitter on his hands.

"And...after midnight?" She questions, straightening the hat herself, still obviously trying to understand this whole New Year's thing.

"After midnight you turn into a pumpkin and I take you home." He reminds her. Mike nearly jumps in to explain but Eleven just gives a

nod of acceptance back at her adopted dad, apparently not questioning the whole pumpkin thing. He absolutely does not pout at being left out of their inside joke.

"Come on Jim, let's leave the kids to their party and I'll make us some coffee." Joyce offers from where she is making her way towards the kitchen. The living room has already grown too noisy for the adults to fully enjoy uncaffeinated.

"I wouldn't say no to a cup." He smiles and follows her, leaving Jonathan and Nancy to watch over the party.

Max is the last one to arrive, having needed to sneak out after her parents left for the night - a fact which they neglect to share with Mrs. Byers or Hopper. Lucas hesitantly offers her a sparkly white paper tiara when she walks in, but she grabs up the black sequined top hat instead. Lucas doesn't seem to mind the rejected offer, however, smiling as she picks the hat that matches his.

"Maybe Lucas wears the tiara in the relationship!" Dustin jokes. He's gradually come to accept their relationship, and has recently taken to teasing them when the opportunity presents itself.

"Shut up, dude," Lucas automatically retorts, but Max's hand has slipped into his own so his response is only half-hearted. "Why don't you harass Mike and El, like, ever?"

"Because it's impossible to embarrass El, duh. Watch this," he turns toward the girl in question, "hey El, nice tiara, when's the wedding!"

"Wedding?" El just looks confused, and turns towards Mike for an explanation. He gives it his best shot.

"Yeah, like for two people when they want to stay together forever, they have this big party and stuff and the girl wears a white dress..."

"Can we have...wedding?" El tries the word out, and Mike blushes furiously, torn between scrambling to explain why they can't and agreeing with anything she asks of him.

"Maybe when you're a little older, kiddo." Nancy steps in to save the conversation.

El pouts a little but seems to accept the answer. Dustin and Lucas both are cracking up at the panicked look on Mike's face, while Max smiles sympathetically at El - simultaneously lamenting the boys' immaturity and letting her know she's not the one being laughed at.

"Oh man, I take it back, that was great!" Dustin declares, throwing an arm around around Lucas's shoulders as they catch their breath. Will just smiles at the antics of his friends.

"Here, I brought out all our games for tonight." He pulls out a pile of board games and sets them out in the middle of the room, having agreed with Mike that they'd wait to play D&D until El could join the campaign. The gang immediately nixes any trivia-based games where El would be at a disadvantage, as well as any game of physical skill, like Jenga, where she could easily win. None of them ever even considered asking her not to use her powers. So they settled on Risk, which was kind of like D&D in a way, and would allow them to team up.

"El's on my team!" Max announces before the boys even have a chance to consider. Mike nearly argues the point but Lucas stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey man, let's take them down!" he challenges back at Max, who answers back with a confident smile.

Will is partnered with Dustin, but he's the one to actually explain the rules of the game to El. She picks up on the game pretty quickly, and it turns out that Max's choosing her was actually pretty strategic. El's unpredictable moves combined with Max's ruthless playing makes for a pretty devastating combination as they rapidly conquer the map. Will and Dustin do fairly well themselves, but Mike and Lucas can't seem to settle on a strategy between the two of them, and they keep losing territory. Nancy and Jonathan offer up some less than helpful commentary from the vantage point of the couch, all of them enjoying the low stakes of the evening, even if the party is rather subdued. At least they are all together.

Which is why Mike tenses a little when a knock sounds at the door, eyes darting to El and Max, who both look towards the door with concern. Lucas is the first one to move, rushing over to the window

to peek out and see who the unexpected visitor is. Mike watches as Lucas's expression flickers with recognition, then turns to confusion.

"Uh guys, I think it's Steve..." Lucas reports back.

"Oh!" Dustin scrambles up to answer the door. "I hope it's cool I invited him."

Without really checking to see whether it's cool or not, he opens the door to reveal Steve Harrington leaning against the Byer's door frame.

"Steve?" Nancy asks, the question 'what are you doing here?' heavily implied. They've been on decent terms since their breakup, and the near end of the world, but they're not really at the point of hanging out just yet.

"Don't worry Nance, I'm just here to check on these little nerds and make sure they survive the year." He offers back as an explanation, stepping confidently into the house like he has just as much right to be there as anybody.

"Hey, who are you calling nerds? You're the one crashing a kids' party." Mike shoots back, eyebrow raised in challenge.

"Hey I'll have you know I am in very high demand at lots of parties. I'm just on my way to Andy Kowalski's house, actually, but I've decided to be fashionably late." This last part seems directed as much at Nancy and Jonathan as at Mike.

"Well we're glad you're here, buddy!" Dustin assures him, "aren't we guys?"

Lucas shrugs, but then a grin sneaks its way onto his face. The truth is they actually are glad he's here, and even Nancy and Jonathan don't argue with it. It feels right, tonight of all nights, that all of them are together to prove they survived the year.

"So what are we playing here?"

"Risk, but Max and El are wiping the floor with us." Will chimes in, and looking at the board it's pretty obvious no one else stands a

chance at winning at this point.

"Then what do you say we move on to a real party game, then?"

"What, like charades?" Will offers up.

"Spin the bottle?" Dustin guesses, trying to figure out what constitutes a 'party' game if not Risk.

"What? Gross, no. I meant like poker." Steve cringes at the idea of these kids playing spin the bottle, with or without him there.

"We don't exactly have any money," Max confesses.

"Then we'll play for pretzels. You got a deck of cards, kid?" Steve takes a seat on the floor with them, bringing down the bowl of snacks with him to distribute. Will runs back to his room to grab a deck, while El jumps up to get a party hat for Steve. All that's left are tiaras, but Steve allows Eleven to place it on his head, flattening his hair around it. Dustin and Lucas burst out laughing at his squashed hairdo as much as at the sparkly tiara, and are practically collapsed on the floor by the time Will gets back. Even Nancy and Jonathan can't help laughing a little at the picture he presents. El looks uncertainty around her, not understanding why everyone else is laughing.

"Uh, El, those are the girl hats..." Mike attempts, and El's face falls further.

Steve, in a rare show of insight, thanks her sincerely. "It's great, kid, thanks."

El looks pleased once more, and Max pats Steve on the arm reassuringly. "Hey, you might not be King Steve anymore but you can still be Queen Steve to us," she grins. Steve bats her hand away but still makes no move to remove the tiara, somehow, strangely, making it work for him.

"Alright you little shits, let's play some poker."

Steve manages to regain a little of his authority while explaining the rules of the game, which is sidetracked into explaining to Eleven that

bluffing in poker isn't the same as lying. But any cool factor he may have regained is lost more when starts losing the game - badly - to Max and El. They all do, really. Even though the game is different and they're no longer working together, they're still somehow winning. Like a lot.

"I think we've got some future card sharks in our midst." Steve declares, half proud, half horrified - his usual state of being around these kids that are all far too smart for the own good.

"I'm not a...shark," Eleven pulls her cards to her chest in indignation.

"Steve just means you're good at cards." Mike reassures her.

"Or he thinks we're cheating," Max jumps in, though it's clear from her tone that she's only joking.

"Wait, El, can you like see what cards we have with your telepathy? Dustin asks.

"She's telekinetic, idiot, not telepathic." Lucas asserts, and Mike decides not to correct him. El isn't exactly telepathic, but she's certainly gaining new ground with her powers. He's not sure she could read their cards, however, and chalks her winning streak up to beginner's luck more than anything.

"Well then how come I've been doing better ever since I start humming the A Team theme in my head?" Dustin argues, and Lucas shakes his head in disbelief.

"Really, that's your plan? You think all it takes to defeat Professor X is a catchy tune?"

"I think you're definitely underestimating the staying power of Come on Eileen." Steve jokes, and they can hear Jonathan snorting out a laugh from the couch. Nancy is possibly humming it now, and the rest of them are all trying very hard not to. Thankfully that seems to end the argument. "Wait, just how are you two winning so many hands?"

Max grins. "Maybe you guys just have really obvious tells."



All of the boys immediately clamor to find out what their tells are, but Max just offers them a smug look, and shoots a knowing smile towards Eleven. The other girl may still be learning a lot, but she's pretty good at picking up on expressions, and there's no question she can tell when her friends are excited or disappointed by their hands. She returns Max's smile, and Mike wonders just how much she can see through him, all of them, even without her mind powers. He doesn't know how the other guys feel about it, but he kind of likes that she's gotten to know them so well.

As the clock passes 11, Dustin finally starts winning a few hands, thanking Mr. T for his mental assistance. Nancy and Jonathan are taking a much needed break from Dick Clark to get some sodas and some non-floor snacks from the kitchen.

"It's getting pretty close to midnight, shouldn't you be getting to your party?" Mike asks Steve, not unkindly.

"Nah, I'm already here, might as well do the countdown at least."

"But don't you need to find a girl to kiss at midnight?" Dustin reminds him.

"Here's a little advice from someone much older and wiser - never hook up around the holidays. Girls always read too much into it and then there's no getting out of it until after Valentine's Day. And then that is a whole other minefield..."

"Dude, that is literally the dumbest advice I've ever heard." Lucas announces after Steve's mini-rant.

"Maybe he just doesn't want to kiss the wrong girl," Will shrugs.

Mike doesn't miss the way Steve glances towards the kitchen when Will says this. Neither does Lucas, who tries to steer the conversation away from this maudlin turn.

"Why are so many holidays about kissing, anyway?"

"What, like you hate it so much?" Max smirks and Lucas stutters, effectively ending the seriousness of the topic.

"It's you and me, dude, New Year's high five!" Dustin concludes. "Will too!"

Steve lets out a noncommittal sound that's more or less an agreement, before grabbing up the cards once more. "Hey, want to see a trick?"

He then proceeds to spin the cards in his fingers and fling them upwards and downwards between his hands in a surprisingly fluid motion before shuffling the deck with a crisp snapping sound. Dustin watches the display in wonder.

"Oh man, Steve should totally be our rogue!"

Steve pauses his elaborate shuffling to question this, "your *what*?"

"For our campaign, the rogue has like...dexterity and stealth." Mike explains.

"And magic tricks!" El adds, pleased to know the answer to this. Mike beams at her, still amazed at how quickly she is picking up on everything new. Lucas rolls his eyes at the two of them, picking up on listing the classes to Steve.

"I'm the Ranger, Mike's the Paladin, Dustin's our Bard, Will's the Cleric, El's our Mage, and Max is our Zoomer."

"Since when is there a Zoomer in D&D?"

"Since I started playing, dickweed!" Max retorts, but Lucas jumps in once more.

"Wait, how do you know there's no official Zoomer class?"

Steve pauses for a moment, before answering. "I mean it's not like I really played or anything. But I had this friend, Matty Owens, who was pretty into it and talked about it non-stop. I might - MIGHT - have played it, you know, once or twice, for his sake of course, but it's not really my thing. And I'm way too mature for that stuff now."

Even Will scoffs at that bit, and El joins in with the gang's laughter at Steve's offended expression. Nancy chooses that moment to walk back into the living room, with Jonathan trailing behind, complaining

about Barry Manilow performing on the countdown.

"Don't look at me, I didn't choose the line up." Nancy asserts, but Jonathan is already rushing off to drag his record player out into the living room, along with an armful of records.

"Real music." El declares sagely, though the reference is lost on Mike.

Steve hops up from his seat, "let's see what you have here, Byers."

Jonathan hesitantly hands over the records in his hands, trying to mask his surprise when Steve actually seems to recognize a number of the artists, humming in approval at several albums.

"Oh now here we go!" He announces, pulling the record from its sleeve and loading it up, carefully lining up the needle for the correct track. He allows several moments for the guitar to play, turning around in dramatic fashion just in time to sing along with the first line.

*Watch out! You might get what you're after*

*Boom babies! Strange but not a stranger*

*I'm - an - ordinary - guy...*

"Didn't peg you for a Talking Heads fan," Jonathan tries not to smile at Steve's overblown performance, but everyone else is getting pretty into it as well.

*"Burning down the house!"* Several voices sing in unison.

*Hold tight! Wait till the party's over*

Even Nancy can't help but join in, grabbing up her near-empty soda to sing into the cup.

*Hold tight! We're in for nasty weather*

The younger kids may not know all the lines but they're jumping up and joining the impromptu dance party, drowning out Barry Manilow's crooning on screen.

*There - has - got - to - be - a - way...*

El takes her cues from Mike, watching him carefully and quietly joining in when everyone else shouts the next line.

*Burning down the house!*

And for a little while all the awkwardness of being together with no monsters to fight melts away in a quest to find the perfect soundtrack to bring in the new year. Nancy is laughing with Steve, still wearing his sparkly tiara, as they sing along to Bowie's "Modern Love", dancing together like old times. Jonathan does something approximating dancing nearby, while Max and Dustin are teaching El some moves. They're all a little spastic, but it works with the music and the night they're having. Joyce and Hopper peek into the room in time to catch them all rocking out to Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life", tossing around the gold and white balloons that litter the floor.

As midnight approaches, Nancy makes the final decision to play "I'll Melt With You" as soon as the ball drops, and everyone else concedes her the choice. Jonathan and Steve more or less work together to set the turntable up to flip the record to side B at what will hopefully be just the right moment, only bickering slightly over how much extra time to factor in for the flipping. The rest of the kids aren't overly concerned with what's playing or if the timing is perfect, since Will is the only one who even knows half these songs.

Joyce and Hopper finally rejoin the party as the minutes count down, bringing in plastic cups and bottles of sparkling cider to pass around.

"Is that actually champagne, Mrs. Byers?" Dustin boggles, while Mike bumps him in the side for being an idiot.

"Oh no, sweetie, your parents would kill me."

"You'd hate it anyway, kid." Hopper adds.

"It's not so bad once you get used to it..." Steve suddenly realizes he's saying this in front of the chief of police. "I mean, that's what I've heard about it. From other people. People who are very much over 21."

Hopper gives him a withering look that seems to indicate Steve should be embarrassed by his pathetic attempt at deflection, but Joyce interrupts before Jim can call him out on the lie.

"Alright, who wants cider?"

Even the adults take a cup for themselves, all gathering around the tv to watch the final moments of 1984 tick away. And it's been a hell of a year, one that certainly won't be missed by most of the people in the room. But Mike finds it hard to totally dismiss the year they took down the DoE and saved the world from the Shadow Monster - the year that brought El back to him. But 1985 would be the year that El was finally safe to go back out into the world, the year they could be together.

In the end the music starts a little before the countdown finishes, but no one seems to mind. Plastic cups are clinked and confetti is tossed in the air, their noisemakers forgotten in all the excitement. As promised, Dustin high-fives Steve, who gladly takes the chance to look away from the sight of Nancy and Jonathan kissing beside him. Max offers up a tentative peck to Lucas, while Joyce kisses Will and Jonathan's cheeks loudly and embarrassingly. Nancy actually hugs Mike, in a move that's still pretty new to both of them - at least without the threat of impending doom to prompt sibling affection, though Jonathan throws his arm easily around Will's shoulder's. Hopper has been hugging El tightly ever since midnight hit, and for a moment Mike regrets that she's not with him, until he feels her gently tugging at his mind, pulling him onto what feels sort of like a mental hug. And somehow it's even more perfect because it's just theirs alone.

*I'll stop the world and melt with you*

*You've seen the difference*

*And it's getting better all the time*

*There's nothing you and I won't do*

*I'll stop the world and melt with you*